

## The rhino is anything but an aphrodisiac for the Maasai



The rhino area of Kenya's Chyulu Hills is a refuge; a paradise where a historical landscape still exists and where walking around might put you face-to-face with a free-ranging Eastern black rhino.

**Samar Ntalamia** | Programme Manager, Big Life Foundation

**B**ack in the late sixties and early seventies, the Maasai country was teeming with Eastern black rhinos. The well-muscled and lanky Maasai warriors would often go to the shallow wells on the banks of Eselenkei River to water their cattle.

The jolly warriors would walk in groups, spears over their shoulders, chanting songs as they moved along. All of a sudden a black rhino would sprint out from under a shade of a tree and charge like a missile. Other common experiences were of rhino heading straight towards a fire at night and stamping it out. The black rhino is quick-tempered and

selects one warrior to be its victim. The warriors would wait in anticipation with their spears poised. You were lucky if the rhino missed the intended victim, because once the rhino passes it never comes back to attack again.

One moonlit evening, my father and his friend were walking through the thick bush to a nearby village to visit their girlfriends. Somewhere on the way they saw dark silhouettes. A few quick steps, a nod of the head and some munching left no questions as to what the animal was. The rhinos snorted as they grazed and after a long wait to see if they would move, my father and his friend gave up on their mission of seeing their dates. Frustrated by their ruined romantic plans, they returned home to spend a lonely night. As a result of experiences like this, for the elder Maasai generation the rhino is anything but an aphrodisiac!

### Present day...

Whereas not a single day would pass in the sixties without a rhino encounter, the situation today is quite grim; with Eastern black rhino numbers having plummeted to the edge

of extinction. In the Chyulu Hills National Park and part of the Maasai group ranch of Mbirikani, the task of protection of these remaining rhino falls upon Big Life Foundation (BLF) rhino rangers and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS).

To the Maasai of the sixties and seventies, the rhino was an enemy that was either avoided or killed for sport to prove bravery. To the present-day young Maasai, like Sergeant Ungani Mpompot and his fellow rangers, rhino and other wildlife are resources that help livelihoods and should be protected. 96% of the 310 BLF rangers are Maasai, known for their bush-craft skills that come in very handy for rhino security and tracking poachers. Some have been community rangers for over 21 years!

Now that the few rhinos are so highly threatened, BLF rangers work with the local Maasai community, as well as the Kenya Wildlife Service. Unemployed Maasai form part of the community-based informer network, which is now dreaded by the poacher community of the Amboseli-Tsavos ecosystem. The poachers say 'don't underrate a Maasai, a VHF radio could be tucked to his sword belt and hidden by the loin cloth and after you pass, they pass on information to the rangers'. The informers are rewarded through an incentives scheme that motivates men and women to be BLF's eyes wherever our rangers cannot be.

In 2012, one such Maasai, easy to ignore to the untrained eye, passed on information to BLF rangers about Somali poachers who were planning on entering the rhino area. This information led to thwarting of a poaching attempt and the arrest of the gang's driver.

### Grants

Since 1 April 2014, Save the Rhino has sent £86,746 to the Big Life Foundation, made up of wonderful grants of \$118,812 from US Fish and Wildlife Service and £16,000 from Chester Zoo.



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Big Life Foundation  
Rangers with  
Maasai warriors  
during the Maasai  
Olympics

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